



Singapore: laying down the tar Always ahead of the pack with its tobacco control policies and ever changing, creative new ways of bringing the message home, Singapore recently came up with another first. A series of health education "advertisements" were painted on road surfaces, like this one on the pedestrian crossing area at a busy street junction. Singapore's prevalence of daily cigarette smoking among adults declined significantly from 15.2% in 1998 to 12.6% in 2004, with males down from 27.1% to 21.8%, though young females (18–29 years) were up from 5.2% to 6.6%.

Control 2004;13:218), but a truly diverse and international group took part. Some were well known from previous protests, but others who came new to the fray, many from the very markets health advocates are most concerned about, also made themselves heard.

The Nightingales are a group of registered nurses from more than 25 American states who, like the other protestors, became shareholders in Altria so they could speak out about the tobacco caused suffering they witness in their daily work (www.nightingalesnurses.org). "Altria claims to be trying to be responsible," said Ruth Malone, associate professor of nursing at the University of California, San Francisco, addressing Mr Camilleri, as she recalled lung cancer patients for whom she has cared, "but do the top executives and investors really fully understand the unspeakable suffering that cigarettes cause with ordinary use? If not, why not? If so, how can you possibly continue to promote these deadly products?"

The nurses displayed a banner made up of letters sent to the company by grieving families and dying consumers, and shared stories of the suffering they witness in caring for tobacco users and their families. They also spoke to several of the proposed shareholder resolutions, including one addressing cigarette sales to pregnant women.

Among other protestors, more than 100 young people and adults from India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Thailand, California, Hawaii, and the USA turned up at the meeting, organised by Essential Action and several youth empowerment programmes, with some 30 going inside to denounce PM's global expansion. Since Altria is celebrating Marlboro's 50th



This year's annual meeting of Altria attracted a diverse group of demonstrators, including the Nightingales (upper panel), a group of registered nurses from more the 25 US states. Other demonstrators marked the 50th anniversary of Marlboro with a "Happy 50th Deathday" cake and card.

anniversary this year, also the 50th anniversary of PM's overseas expansion, demonstrators marked the anniversaries outside the meeting with a "Happy 50th Deathday" cake, black balloons, a 15 foot (4.6 m) high Marlboro pack labelled "50 Years of Death", and photographs of the company's tobacco promotions around the world.

Inside the meeting, Camilleri was presented with a "Happy 50th Deathday" card. As he started to list all the company's "socially responsible" activities around the world, such as Asian

tsunami relief, support of domestic violence victims, and food for the hungry, about two dozen youths and adults covered themselves in black death shrouds bearing skull images and large "Happy 50th Deathday" stickers, and stood up. Mr Camilleri interrupted his speech to order everyone to sit down and stop blocking other people's view, whereupon two protestors then moved to the aisle and stood facing the audience for the remainder of the meeting. It is good to see Big Tobacco being confronted by increasing levels of protest by those speaking up against what it is doing around the world.

Altogether, protest speeches accounted for around an hour of Altria's annual shareholders' meeting. It can only get worse.

USA: Reynolds goes smoke-free

Three days after the Altria/PM annual meeting (see above), Reynolds American (Reynolds) held its own annual shareholders' meeting. It is the holding company of RJ Reynolds Tobacco, the second largest cigarette company in the USA, which manufactures and markets about one third of the cigarettes sold there, and is the only part of the former RJ Reynolds group not bought up by Japan Tobacco. As with Altria, Reynolds found itself facing a record number of activists, including Anne Morrow Donley, co-founder and president of the anti-tobacco group Virginia GASP.

The activists dominated the meeting, though unfortunately for them, the press was not there in force; tobacco companies probably now prefer to deal with financial press privately to ensure that their all important financial results and future prospects get reported free of inconvenient content related to the human realities of their trade. Previous meetings had been filled with smoke, so Anne Morrow Donley brought along a respirator. Getting to the meeting an hour early to discuss the situation with the company (it was at Reynolds' headquarters in Winston Salem, North Carolina), she suggested that either the meeting would have to be smoke-free, or she would have to wear the respirator.

At first she was told she should wear the respirator if she was comfortable doing so, but soon other company officials became involved and tried to get a wireless microphone to work from the non-smoking observers' room. However, practical considerations seemed too difficult to resolve, and they decided that the simplest solution was...to make the meeting smoke-free. As the activists walked into the meeting room, ushers



Gambia: BAT's boasts British American Tobacco's public relations advertisements hold a second, sinister meaning for African tobacco control advocates trying to prevent increasing recruitment to smoking in some of the world's poorest countries.

on either side were saying over and over again to everyone attending, "This meeting is smoke-free. Please do not light up". When Reynolds president and chief executive Andrew Schindler opened the meeting, his welcome was quickly followed by the same request, and the explanation that the meeting was smoke-free "at the request of shareholders and guests".

A reporter from the *The Winston-Salem Journal* remarked that he was "stunned" by the announcement. He was reminded by another activist, Father Michael Crosby, the Catholic priest well known for his campaigning work to reduce tobacco deaths, that



The prospect of having Anne Morrow Donley wearing her respirator at the annual shareholders' meeting may have had something to do with Reynolds' hasty and highly unusual decision to make the meeting smoke-free.

when the company did the right thing, no one challenged it. (Crosby seconded a resolution to require Reynolds to make self-extinguishing cigarettes for all markets, reminding Schindler that in 1997, a cigarette fire caused \$1 million in damage to Schindler's vacation home and surrounding properties. Schindler made no response.) Despite the reporter's amazement, the subsequent report in *The Winston-Salem Journal* carried no mention of the historic move to a non-smoking meeting.

Swedish Match: sucked into controversy, worldwide

Swedish Match used not to feature much in international tobacco control discussions—it supplied the Swedish market with its oral tobacco (snus) products, and that, it seemed, was only a matter of concern for Swedish colleagues. But in recent years, as cigarette manufacturers have been hurling themselves ever more forcefully into the great scramble for the developing world, Swedish Match has been going international too. For example, realising that India was the world's largest oral tobacco market, it launched its Click brand there (see Gupta PC. India: Swedish Match steps in. *Tobacco Control* 2001;10:307). Recently, it has been seen in action, and controversy, in several more overseas markets.

When British American Tobacco (BAT) caused a stir earlier this year by announcing it was launching an oral tobacco product in South Africa, few outside the country realised there was much of a snuff market there. In fact, it

has been around for some time, and Swedish Match became the second largest producer in 1999, when it acquired a local manufacturer. Its Taxi brand is the country's top seller, and Swedish Match also markets a brand called Tobaccorette. Many feel the name is uncomfortably close to the smoking cessation product Nicorette, a nicotine containing chewing gum. South Africa has a total ban on tobacco promotion, and it seems Tobaccorette was introduced into parts of the country through "viral" marketing. Produced in Zimbabwe, it does not carry the warning label "Causes Cancer" as required by law for smokeless tobacco products.

As public health workers around the world continue to debate harm reduction policies, including the place within them of oral tobacco, South Africa may be about to see whether a significant new body of South African cigarette smokers replaces some or all of their smoking with snus. They will also be watching to see how BAT markets the product and whether it tries to make health claims about it. Last year, scientists at the University of Pretoria confronted Swedish Match about health claims on a website advertisement that implied that Tobaccorette had no health hazards. The company later shut down the site, claiming it had not approved of the ad.



An advertisement for the Swedish Match company's oral tobacco product, Tobaccorette.

It appears that Swedish Match may be somewhat out of touch with what is done to promote its products around the world. Earlier this year, health advocates in Scotland, where tobacco control laws may soon be significantly stronger than in other parts of the UK after its devolved parliament votes on a workplace smoking ban, were alerted by ASH Scotland to yet another insidious tobacco related campaign aimed at university students. Free samples of "Styx", a kit containing hand rolling cigarette papers and filters, were being handed out in the student bar in Edinburgh. It is not known how many university students or staff, apart from the small minority involved in classical studies, would appreciate the irony of the name: in ancient Greek mythology, the Styx was the river that had to be crossed by the dead, to the realm of Hades, the underworld at the other side.